

STATE PARKS, RECREATION AND TRAVEL COMMISSION

Jonesboro, AR

February 28, 2024, 9:00 AM

APPROVED 04/18/2024

Commissioners Present

Jim Shamburger, Chair
Blair Allen, Vice-Chair
Rebecca Baker
Bob Connell
Mike Gibson
Ron Gossage
Shash Goyal
Randy Wolfinbarger
Mike Wilson
Austin Albers
Molly Houseworth-Jackson
Eric Jackson
Weston Lewey

Commissioners Absent

Trey Berry
Kalene Griffith

Staff Present

Shea Lewis, Secretary, ADPHT
Suzanne Grobmyer, Chief of Staff, ADPHT
Clay Stone, General Counsel, ADPHT
Dalaney Thomas, Tourism Director, Arkansas Tourism
Shealyn Sowers, Deputy Chief of Communications, ADPHT
Elaine Lienhart, Executive Assistant, ADPHT
Jami Fisher, Chief Financial Officer, ADPHT
Kristine Puckett, Deputy Director, Arkansas Tourism
Leah DiPietro, Deputy Chief of Communications, ADPHT
Susie Cowan, Project Coordinator, Tourism
Melissa Adams, Welcome Center Administrator, Tourism
Jeff King, Deputy Director, Arkansas State Parks
Mike Wilson, Manager of Operations, Arkansas State Parks
Jeannine Bruner, Revenue Operations Manager, Arkansas State Parks
Chris Meyers, Planning and Development Manager, Arkansas State Parks
Darin Mitchell, Information & Innovation Manager, Arkansas State Parks
Kelly Farrell, Chief of Interpretation & Program Services
Marty Ryall, Director, Div. of AR Heritage & Legislative Affairs Director, ADPHT
Teddy Stewart, Chief of Staff to the First Gentleman

CJRW

Darin Gray
Jessica Frahm
Brian Kratkiewicz
Mark Raines
Blake Bowlin
Wade McCune
Keegan Wright
Emilie Reno
Jill Joslin
Sarah VanDoorn
Cassidy Gallaher
Sarah Rech

Miles Partnership

Emily Dixon

Guests

Gary Jones, Jones Video
Tanya Freeman, Office of State Procurement
Brandi Schroeder, Office of State Procurement
Ed Armstrong, Office of State Procurement
Shane Broadway
Gina Gemberling, LRCVB
Susan West, Arkansas Tech University
Bill Barnes + guest, Mountain Harbor Resort

Welcome and Call to Order

Chair Jim Shamburger called the meeting to order at 9:01 am and welcomed new Commissioner, Gary Vernon. The Chair thanked Kandi Baker and the Red Wolf Convention Center-Embassy Suites for the meeting space and refreshments, and recognized guests. Elaine Lienhart called roll. Shamburger thanked past-chair Randy Wolfenbarger and presented him with a plaque.

Approval of Agenda

Chairman Shamburger asked for a motion to approve the agenda.

Mike Wilson made the motion to approve the agenda; Weston Lewey seconded, and the motion carried.

Approval of January 2024 Minutes

Chairman Jim Shamburger asked for a motion to approve the January 2024 minutes.

Shash Goyal made the motion to approve the minutes; Eric Jackson seconded, and the motion carried.

Secretary's Report

Secretary Shea Lewis recapped the 50th annual Governor's Conference on Tourism and what a successful event it was. He thanked the City of Jonesboro for stepping up in a big way for the conference.

Lewis introduced and welcomed Clay Stone, the new General Counsel for the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism. Stone has over 20 years of experience in the private sector.

Lewis participated in an Eclipse Satellite Media Tour doing 27 interviews back-to-back; Governor Sanders did an hour block of interviews. The purpose of this media tour was to promote Arkansas for Total Eclipse viewing.

Lewis reported that the department has begun the RFP (Request for Proposal) process for contracting with a vendor(s) for promotion, advertising, public relations and website services. The bid opening will be March 12, 2024. Ed Armstrong and Brandi Schroeder from the Office of State Procurement joined Secretary Lewis to explain the procurement process and answer questions. Eric Jackson expressed his concern and opinion of the RFP process. Lewis stated that he, Commissioner Kalene Griffith and Deputy Chief of Communications Leah DePietro will be on the committee. Discussion ensued.

FINANCIAL REPORT – January 31, 2024

Chief Fiscal Officer Jami Fisher presented the FY 2024 Year-to-Date Financial Report for the seven-month period ending January 31, 2024.

FY 2024 Year-to-Date Revenues were:

- Parks Division Operating Revenue - \$19,395,435 an increase of 7.62%
- War Memorial Operating Revenue - \$1,041,906 an increase of 30.04%
- 1/8 Cent Conservation Tax Revenue - \$27,921,447 an increase of 1.91%
- 2% Gross Tax Collections - \$15,622,735 a decrease of 4.53%

FY 2024 Year-to-Date Expenditures were:

- Parks Division (including Construction and Grants) - \$62,728,997 an increase of 10.05%
- Tourism Division - \$10,597,394 a decrease of -7.90%
- War Memorial - \$1,294,243 an increase of 7.52%
- Department Total - \$74,620,635 an increase of 7.04%

Please Note: percentages (%) are in comparison to the same period in the prior fiscal year.

Eric Jackson made the motion to approve the financials; Austin Albers seconded, and the motion carried.

TOURISM DIVISION

Director's Report

Dalaney Thomas reported that Susie Cowan was hired as the Industry Relations Manager. The next priority is to hire a Deputy Director to work closely with the Director on building partnerships and internal personnel management. The position of Marketing Manager is still being advertised. The final position to be advertised is Project Coordinator.

Thomas reported that vacation rentals are up 352% and hotel rentals are up 105% from this time last year. Revenue for both vacation rentals and hotels are spiking.

Weston Lewey inquired about how the Henry Awards are decided. Thomas reviewed the process and the commissioners requested that the process be shared with the industry next year.

Arkansas Tourism is partnering with the Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau for the upcoming Southeast Tourism Society's Domestic Showcase coming to Little Rock on March 20-23, 2024, at the Statehouse Convention Center. There will be over 300 tour operators and journalists having pre-scheduled meetings and participating in post-event familiarization tours around the state.

Another in-market activation will be held in May while the Tourism Division is in Chicago for a partnership with Local Palate. Thomas continues to work with CJRW on influencer and brand partnerships and is looking at potential celebrity partnerships.

CJRW

Jessica Frahm presented the results of the fall campaign for CJRW. She went over the goals, markets and timing.

- Opportunity markets ran Outside the Ordinary campaign.
- Brian Kratkiewicz broke down the video display and streaming.
- Digital media overview is 97% or \$12.3 million.
- 8% went to the field and stream, 18% reaching the outdoor audiences, 72% reaching the travel audiences.
- Opportunity markets received 26% of the budget and 74% of the budget went to the key feeder markets. The reporting period is August 1st to December 31st.

Mark Raines reported for Public Relations from August through February. Really good news coverage from the Graveler announcement in August at the news conference with the Governor. The 2022 Tourism Impact Report and the announcement of the new Tourism Director last fall at the news conference on the lawn of the Old Statehouse.

Paid news content on the Agritourism Industry was a very successful program.

News blitz with Secretary Lewis and Governor Sanders about the eclipse was well received and hit every market between Boston and Seattle.

There are 15 people from NASA coming to Arkansas for the Eclipse. Others coming to Arkansas are the New York Times, CNN, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, and more.

CJRW is ramping up the eclipse marketing to the feeder markets.

Cassidy Gallagher reported on social media; 2023 was a great year for organic social media.

Facebook, X, and Instagram reached over 15 million impressions and 500,000 engagements.

Pinterest is receiving over 34,000 views per month with 10-year-old content so there will be a new focus on that platform.

Wade McCune did a spring creative preview. The videos were created more like a short story rather than an ad to experience Arkansas from different angles.

STATE PARKS DIVISION

Director's Report

Jeff King, Deputy Director, shared updates on the following items with the Commission:

- **FY24 Financials:** State Parks Division continues to have positive trends moving towards the end of Fiscal Year 2024; January was a tough month due to the winter weather. All revenues were down for January but, overall, are trending up for the year.
- **Extra help** is up 100% over last year, according to financials. Parks have approximately 350 extra help employees right now and that number will increase to over 750 in peak season. There are over 940 positions available for extra help and they are being utilized to backfill some full-time positions that have not been able to be filled. Average wage for these extra help positions is \$13.55 per hour; however, Parks has approval to move seasonal interpreter positions up to \$15.33 per hour. A request will go to the Legislative Council in March for additional appropriation to cover extra help budget for the remainder of the Fiscal Year.
- **Operating Expenses:** Arkansas State Parks was approved by ALC – PEER Subcommittee in January for an appropriation increase for the FY24 operating budget. The increase was requested from cash operating revenues to cover the new reservation and point of sale system.
- **Mena Trails Masterplan:** Several firms were interviewed on January 31 and SE Group was selected to work on the project. The contract is currently being finalized. SE Group will be partnering with several of the top, local, architectural and engineering firms for this project.
- **Delta Heritage Trail (DHT):** Arkansas Business published an article about DHT called “Final 13.4 Miles of Delta Heritage Trail Within Sight” on 2/26/24. State Parks is under contract for what will be one of the last phases of construction... a \$11.7M contract for the Yancopin (Arkansas River) Bridge project. The contractor is confident he can complete the contract in under a year. The project is being funded with both federal and private funds.
- **ARDOT TAP/RTP Grants:** Arkansas State Parks received \$500,000 in ARDOT TAP grants for the Benzal (White River) Bridge at DHT and a \$225,000 grant for the “Trees of the Forest Interpretive Trail” for visitors with visual impairments at Lake Sylvia.
- **Missouri State Parks:** Several maintenance supervisors from Missouri State Parks visited the monument trails at Hobbs and Devil’s Den to observe the trail maintenance program and share best practices with the Arkansas State Parks team.

- **Eclipse:** It is 40 days until the eclipse. Updates are being made to Arkansas State Parks webpage to include maps of each park in totality that will help direct visitors on where they can go for the following: eclipse viewing locations, parking, first aid, etc. The website will also include tips for what to expect the day of the eclipse and links to external partner resources (ARDOT, Department of Health, NASA, National Weather Service). All the posted information should help to minimize damage to resources as well as overcrowding at any one spot. State Parks will limit the number of vehicles/guests at each park and visitors may be turned away if a park reaches capacity. A communications plan, including a social media campaign, about park capacity is to be completed by March 8, 2024.

Reservations 4-night minimum for eclipse event:

- Parks are currently at 89.5% occupancy in totality, overall occupancy is 73%, and outside of totality, parks are at 34.6%. To increase occupancy statewide, State Parks is requesting the Commission allow a reduction in the 4-night minimum for eclipse event reservations (primarily for parks outside of totality). Reservations restrictions would remain for 2-nights, and this change would not impact guests who already have reservations with a 4-night minimum.

Eric Jackson made a motion to approve. Bob Connell seconded, and the motion carried.

Mike Wilson, Operations Manager, gave a brief update on **winter storm damage** at state parks:

- Several parks received damage due to winter storms and freezing temperatures January 17-18, 2024. Damage included water breaks at Lake Dardanelle and at the Arkansas Museum of Natural Resources. Total damages are estimated at \$175,000. Insurance is expected to cover repair with the exception of a \$25,000 deductible.

Kelly Farrell, Program Services Manager, gave the following update on **First Day Hikes**:

- It was a record year with 1556 participants in guided programs and 771 additional hikers self-reporting online. Arkansas State Parks was in the top 5 nation-wide in number of guided hikes in state parks.

Parkin Archeological State Park – Certificate of Appreciation - Ben Swadley

- Jeff King requested approval for a Certificate of Appreciation for Ben Swadley who served 40 years with Arkansas State Parks.

Shash Goyal made a motion to approve. Austin Albers seconded, and the motion carried.

Real Estate, Leases & Agreements

Historic Washington – Revised Property Acquisitions Proposal – Historic Washington Foundation *

- Jeff King asked for approval to purchase three of the original five properties the commission reviewed last year. These properties would include the Livery Stable, Carrigan Field, and the Telephone Exchange.
- Per Mr. King, the Division of Heritage has expressed interest in acquiring the remaining two properties and potentially partnering with Arkansas State Parks to operate and maintain the properties.

Mike Wilson made a motion to approve. Weston Lewey seconded, and the motion carried.

An additional motion was made to provide a plan for Historic Washington no later than February 2025.

Eric Jackson made a motion to approve. Shash Goyal seconded, and the motion carried.

Devil's Den – Concessionaire Lease Agreement – QCMM LLC dba Ridgerunner Café *

- The commission was asked to approve a 3-year agreement with Ridgerunner Café at Devil's Den with a 10% gross revenue share. The only change is that the new agreement would include the right to sell alcoholic beverages once state parks' ABC license is issued.

Weston Lewey made a motion to approve. Eric Jackson seconded, and the motion carried.

Crater of Diamonds – Concessionaire Lease Agreement – Kickin' Wingz*

- The commission was asked to approve a 3-year concession lease agreement for Kickin' Wingz at Crater of Diamonds State Park with a 17% gross revenue share. The only change is that the new agreement would include the right to sell alcoholic beverages once state parks' ABC license is issued.

Shash Goyal made a motion to approve. Rebecca Baker seconded, and the motion carried.

Pinnacle Mountain – Use Permit Agreement – Central Arkansas Water *

- Darin Mitchell, Manager, Information & Innovation, requested renewal of an agreement with Central Arkansas Water for use of 35.9 acres along State Highway 300 which have been leased by Arkansas State Parks since 1972. The renewed lease would expire on December 31, 2049.

Blair Allen made a motion to approve. Weston Lewey seconded, and the motion carried.

Crowley's Ridge – Use Permit Agreement – Western Greene County Fire District *

- Mr. Mitchell asked the commission to renew a use agreement with Western Green County Fire District at Crowley's Ridge for use of one of our dry fire hydrants. The renewed lease will expire March 21, 2029.

Shash Goyal made a motion to approve. Austin Albers seconded, and the motion carried.

Planning & Development

Systemwide – Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council – FY25 Grant Application for State Parks Division Proposed Projects *

Christopher Myers, Manager, Planning & Development, asked for approval of the provided grant application document detailing the ANCRC FY25 grant cycle request. The request includes twenty-one projects totaling \$16,520,000 in proposed funding.

Shash Goyal made a motion to approve. Bob Connell seconded, and the motion carried.

Select State Parks – Memorandum of Understanding – Adopt A Charger *

Mr. Myers asked the commission for approval of a new Memorandum of Understanding with Adopt A Charger to provide electric vehicle charging stations for designated state parks.

Eric Jackson made a motion to approve. Austin Albers seconded, and the motion carried.

Marketing Update – CJRW

Blake Bowlin, CJRW, gave a presentation detailing FY24 marketing results for July 2023 – January 2024. Updates were provided for the following:

- Paid Social and Paid Search Campaign results
- Organic Social Media results
- Adara Attribution Report for State Parks Bookings
- Public Relations/Paid News
- Arkansas State Parks Brand Refresh sneak peek

MISCELLANEOUS/CLOSING

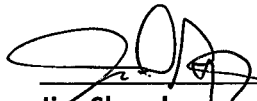
There were no public comments.

With no further business, a motion was made to adjourn.

Mike Gibson made a motion to adjourn. Rebecca Baker seconded, and the motion carried.

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I acknowledge these minutes are approved:



04/18/2024

Jim Shamburger, Chair